

Parergon: Attribut, Material und Fragment in der Bildästhetik des Quattrocento.
Anna Degler.

Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink, 2015. 300 pp. €39.90.

The humanist invitation “ad fontes” cannot be repeated often enough, as is illustrated once again by the case of the term *παράεργον*. Generations of scholars consulting Galen’s *On the Usefulness of the Parts* in common Latin translations have not spotted the noteworthy use of the word in reference to artistic ornamentation; this is unfortunate, since the term itself must be considered crucial to antique and early modern concepts of ornament, detail, landscape painting, and — last but not least — for the definition of the work of art itself (the *ἔργον*). More importantly, however, is that sources mentioning the word *parergon* in the context of the visual arts are extremely rare, even if writers such as Strabo, Plutarch, Vitruvius, and later the author of the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Alciato, Giovio, Paleotti, and Junius the Younger made use of it on at least at one occasion.

In modern aesthetics the *parergon* became popular through Jacques Derrida’s 1978 *The Truth in Painting*, although Derrida, who became aware of the word in Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*, was neither interested in contextualizing the term historically, nor, to put it bluntly, did he have the philological and art historical competence to do so. Even though two decades later art historians made use of the concept “*ergon/parergon*” to analyze the work of Albrecht Altdorfer and Nicolas Poussin, among others, it is the great merit of Anna Degler to shed light on the whole range of historical sources concerning

πάρεργα, a solid basis that allows her to approach the meaning and relevance of certain marginal elements that at first glance seem to be less important than the central subject of some fifteenth-century paintings.

The book, originating in Degler's 2012 dissertation, begins with the literary foundations of the concept mentioned above, including Strabo's famous critique of Protogenes, who accompanied the painting of a satyr with a partridge, the latter distracting beholders from the artwork's main object. She then examines in three following chapters selected details in paintings, choosing mainly — but not exclusively — religious artworks originating from Northern Italy, especially those by artists such as Francesco del Cossa, Carlo Crivelli, and Vittore Carpaccio, whose playful and richly ornamented style has often attracted art historians. By concentrating on the composition and spatial role of well-known examples such as the snail and the cucumber in the *Annunciations* by Cossa and Crivelli, she points out how the artists use animals and vegetables to strengthen a narrative's realism, overcome distance to the beholder, and engender presence or a temporal dimension, and in which way such *parerga* denote the painting's status as an image. While the aspect of materiality, despite its mention in the book's title, is touched upon in a rather cursory way, Degler emphasizes at length her interpretation of saints' attributes and bodily fragments as *parerga*, following Derrida by arguing that the relation of the "proto-ergon" body to its attribute resembles the relation of the "ergon/*parergon*" in an image. Her book, which includes noteworthy excursions on Alberti's notion of *ornamentum* and the *ludi mathematici*, is concluded by a lengthy treatment of *voluptas* and more general remarks concerning the critical reception of Ferrarese artists and their presumed relations to concepts such as the *anti-rinascimento*, but even surrealism and camp.

Throughout the book the reader is reminded of former suggestions to approach certain painterly phenomena under the terms of "detail," "accessory," "ornament," "frame," "trompe-l'oeil," "by-work" (in and not in the Warburgian sense), and so on. The author's particular definition of the *parergon*, however, might seem a bit too broad; Degler herself admits to "straining the term *parergon* to the extreme" ("strapazieren wir nun den Begriff Parergon bis zum Äußersten hin"): treating centrally placed details of high iconographic relevance, such as the egg in Piero della Francesca's *Pala Montefeltro* or the keys in Crivelli's *Madonna and Child Presenting the Keys to Saint Peter*, with the same terminology that once identified landscape details in the background remains unsatisfactory and a regrettable trend toward a universalistic terminological randomness. Degler's justified criticism of art historical concepts such as Panofsky's "disguised symbolism" within the discussion of such questions often lacks conclusive arguments. Even her reflections on the historical discussion sometimes seem less precise, as she appears, for example, to have completely overlooked Winckelmann's treatment of the "Nebending oder Parergon." Nevertheless, her learned, well-written, and occasionally provocative book makes a major contribution toward understanding the *πάρεργον* as being

much more than an expression of *l'art pour l'art* or a symbolical reference, but as an ambiguous supplement and opposition to what our eyes seem to perceive.

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